

TIBETAN LIFE AND TIBETOLOGICAL DISCOURSE:
DIFFERENCES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Gerald Roche (Griffith University/ Qinghai Normal University), Nag tshang grub rgyal, and Mtsho mo skyid (Qinghai Normal University)

ABSTRACT

Heider's method of auto-ethnography is used to examine differences between everyday life as perceived by Tibetans and the Western Tibetological discourse that seeks to represent it. The significance of these differences is further discussed by examining the failure of critical discourse to impact Tibetology and narrow the gap between discourse and reality. Recommendations are made for improving Tibetology.

KEY WORDS

Tibet, Tibetology, Orientalism, Auto-ethnography

INTRODUCTION

Tibetology should strive to study *all* aspects of Tibet¹ in the same sense that climatology is the study of *all* aspects of climate, anthropology is the broad-based study of *all* humans, and ornithology is the study of *all* birds. In this context we examine differences between Tibet as evidenced by self-reportage of daily life by Tibetans and what Tibetologists² write about Tibet in the English language literature.³

Though not the first critique of Tibetology's content (see the *The Failure of Critical Discourse*, below) and methods (e.g., Child 2005 and Hansen 2003), this paper is unique in the method used to support our claims, and the extent to which they may be independently verified.

A comparison of Tibetological discourse with life as perceived by Tibetans is first made and then we outline the attempt of Tibetology to more closely align Tibetological discourse with Tibetan life, and the failure of that attempt. We conclude by making recommendations for the reform of Tibetology.

¹ The people, culture, and the location.

² A Tibetologist is defined as anyone who has published an article about Tibet here in international, peer-reviewed English language literature.

³ What Tibetologists report about Tibet, Tibetans, and Tibetan culture in published literature is hereafter referred to as 'the Tibetological discourse'.

PART ONE: COMPARING TIBETAN LIFE AND TIBETOLOGICAL DISCOURSE

To learn more about Tibetans' perceptions of their everyday life, a method of auto-ethnography⁴ demonstrated by Heider (1975), who asked sixty Grand Valley Dani school children 'What do people do?' is briefly examined. Heider obtained fifty answers from each child and presented this material by focusing on patterns of saliency (which responses were most common) and intergroup response differences, i.e., how males and females responded differently. For the purpose of linguistic analysis, he also presented the data alphabetically according to the main verb in each response.

Using this method, we focused on patterns of saliency rather than intergroup differences or linguistic analysis, by asking a sample of Tibetans to self-report on what people in their home area usually do. The question, 'What do people in your home usually do?'⁵ was given on paper, in Tibetan.⁶ Each respondent was asked to provide five answers, in order to describe general community life rather than the lives of specific individuals.

Eighty-seven respondents were surveyed, of whom forty-four were male and forty-three were female. At the time of the survey, all respondents were students in the

⁴ Heider's concept of auto-ethnography differs from the more common contemporary usage of the term 'autoethnography', meaning anthropologically informed and culturally aware autobiography (Berger and Ellis 2002).

⁵ ཁྱེད་ཀྱི་ཡུལ་དུ་མི་ཚོས་རྒྱུན་དུ་བྱ་བ་ཅི་ཞིག་བྱེད་དམ། The Tibetan *yul*/ means home in the general sense of home area/ territory/ town.

⁶ A copy of the survey form, along with a complete set of the data analyzed, may be obtained from the first author at gjroche@gmail.com.

English Training Program at Qinghai Normal University.⁷ In terms of livelihood, thirty-three percent reported that their family are nomads, thirty-two indicated they were farmers, and twenty-seven percent wrote that they were agro-pastoralists. The remaining eight percent lived in towns and cities doing wage labor; government work was the most common form of employment. All respondents were from Tibetan areas in China. The largest percentage of respondents (forty-two percent) was from Qinghai Province, followed by Sichuan Province (thirty-two percent), and Gansu Province (twenty-one percent). Five respondents were from Yunnan Province and one respondent was from the Tibet Autonomous Region. The average age of respondents was 18.6 years at the time of the survey (December 2007).

Ninety-three percent of respondents answered in Tibetan, three respondents wrote in English, and three answered in Chinese. Although respondents were asked to provide five responses each, only seventy-eight percent did so. We received a total of 409 responses. Fifteen responses were excluded from the analysis for one of the following reasons:

1. 'Double barrel' responses that included more than one activity, e.g., 'When Mother finishes farming she does housework'.
2. Incomprehensible or incomplete responses.

This gave a total of 394 responses that were analyzed by categorizing individual answers to reflect salient patterns of similarity: herding, farming, labor,⁸ business, education,

⁷ For a brief description of this program and the uniqueness of its students, see Bangsbo (2008).

⁸ Labor includes such unskilled labor as construction work.

housework, collecting items for income,⁹ leisure, religious activities, miscellaneous,¹⁰ office work, skilled labor, statements,¹¹ collecting fuel, handicrafts, and usual work.¹² These categories were ranked to obtain a numerically generated, hierarchically organized picture of what Tibetans usually do (see below).

To analyze the content of Tibetological discourse, a method mirroring, to some extent, auto-ethnography was utilized to analyze 558 English-language article titles published in the *Proceedings of the International Association of Tibetan Studies* between 1977 and 2000 (excluding the unpublished Eighth Seminar). Each title suggests a single subject, which made categorization easier. Titles were obtained from the database of the Tibetan and Himalayan Digital Library (www.thdl.org, accessed 20 December 2007).

Individual article titles were sorted into categories based on their topic and placed into the following categories: religion; history; language; miscellaneous; art (visual); literature; exile; livelihood; music; manuscripts, archives and collections; architecture, regional/ group description; health/ medicine; cartography; nationalism; dance; development/ modernity; computing; marriage; and

⁹ This includes collecting caterpillar fungi (*Cordiceps sinensis*) a medicinal herb collected in grassland areas during spring and summer. One fungus fetched five to forty RMB in 2007.

¹⁰ When it was impossible to make a category with three or more responses, responses were grouped together in a miscellaneous category.

¹¹ Several respondents used the survey as a forum to make general statements about local conditions, for example 'The local economy is underdeveloped'.

¹² We cannot explain the exact meaning of this response.

law.¹³ Titles were placed in a miscellaneous category when it was impossible to establish a category of three or more entries.¹⁴ Categories reflecting salient patterns in the data were chosen, rather than preemptively designing categories and forcing data into them.

Figure One summarizes the findings of the auto-ethnographic component of this study. Responses strongly reflect subsistence activities. Herding and farming are almost a third of all responses, followed by labor and business. The first non-subsistence, non-economic category to appear is education.

Figure One: Auto-ethnography responses ranked by number.

Category	Number	Percent ¹⁵
Herding	68	17
Farming	54	14
Labor	48	12
Business	36	9
Education	34	9
Housework	30	8
Collecting Items for Income	27	7
Leisure	18	5
Religious Activities	17	4
Miscellaneous	14	3
Office Work	11	3
Skilled Labor	9	2
Statements	8	2
Collecting Fuel	7	2

¹³ Categorization was subjective in the sense that art (visual), dance, and music could be combined and placed in 'expressive arts'.

¹⁴ This category contains titles ranging from 'psychic sports' to hippology.

¹⁵ Percentages are rounded, and may not total exactly one hundred percent.

Handicrafts	7	2
Usual Work	6	1
Total	394	

Figure Two summarizes Tibetological discourse, suggesting keen interest in Tibetan religion and little interest in such vernacular aspects of culture as livelihood, marriage, and architecture. Such 'high culture' topics as religion, history, visual art, and literature constitute seventy percent of the articles.

Figure Two: Analysis of Tibetological discourse, ranked by number.

Category	Number	Percent ¹⁶
Religion	244	44.0
History	90	16.0
Language	44	8.0
Miscellaneous	36	6.0
Art (visual)	35	6.0
Literature	21	4.0
Exile	15	3.0
Livelihood	13	2.0
Music	11	2.0
Manuscripts, Archives, and Collections	10	2.0
Architecture	7	1.0
Regional/ Group Description	5	1.0
Health/ Medicine	4	1.0
Cartography	4	1.0
Nationalism	4	1.0
Dance	3	0.5
Development/ Modernity	3	0.5
Computing	3	0.5
Marriage	3	0.5

¹⁶ Percentages are rounded, and may not total exactly one hundred percent.

Law	3	0.5
Total	558	

One difference between the results of our analysis of Tibetan auto-ethnography and our analysis of Tibetological articles is the 'top-heavy' nature of Tibetological discourse. Almost half the articles we analyzed were about Tibetan religion. In comparison, the Tibetan auto-ethnography showed a much more even spread of results, i.e., to have a percentage equal to the highest-ranked category in Tibetological discourse, the first three highest-ranked categories from the auto-ethnography must be combined.

In terms of differential ranking, religion is ranked first in Tibetological discourse (accounting for forty-four percent), but is ranked only ninth in the auto-ethnography (four percent). Articles written by Tibetologists tend to focus on text-based manifestations of religion, whereas none of the responses in the auto-ethnography mentioned 'Read religious texts' or anything similar. Instead, self-reported religious activities focused on such activities as circumambulation and household rituals. In addition, subsistence and economic activities account for over half of the auto-ethnography responses, while Tibetological discourse ranks livelihoods very low, with only two percent of published articles dedicated to this subject.

Tibetological discourse ignores Tibetan vernacular culture in favor of focusing on 'high culture'. Other social sciences such as anthropology, history, sociology, and culture studies, abandoned this approach long ago. This skewing is partly due to the relative ease with which texts may be accessed as opposed to the living cultures of Tibetan people, particularly in China.

This study has six methodological flaws: the question that was asked in the auto-ethnography component of the study, the categories into which the auto-ethnographic responses and Tibetological article titles were sorted, the

false dichotomy between Tibetan life and Tibetological discourse, respondent age, respondent region, and the definition of 'Tibetologist' used.

Differences such as those outlined above arose, given the question that was asked in the auto-ethnography. 'What do people usually do?' suggests answers focusing on work that may create a distorted distinction between Tibetan daily life and Tibetological discourse. Equally valid questions include: 'What is important for Tibetan people?' 'What would you like the world to know about Tibetans?' or 'What makes Tibetan culture special?' We encourage others to perform such investigations, to provide greater insight into Tibetan perspectives on Tibetan life.

The categorization of auto-ethnographic responses and Tibetological article titles is problematic. Other researchers, with different orientations and backgrounds, might classify the material differently. Without establishing *a priori* categories and forcing the data into them, such subjectivity is inevitable. Though every effort was made to establish categories reflecting patterns in the actual data, other scholars may wish to take this data set and perform alternative analyses.

A third problem is caused by establishing a false dichotomy between Tibet and Tibetological discourse. A small number of the articles analyzed as part of Tibetological discourse were written by Tibetans. The dichotomy between Tibetan life and Tibetological discourse is, therefore, at least to some extent, false. In fact, Tibetological discourse is, in part, produced and consumed as part of Tibetan life. We hope that others will examine the significance and meaning of this link more closely.

A fourth problem concerns the age of respondents, whose average was 18.6 years. No attempt was made to survey Tibetans of a variety of ages, which might have produced different results.

Another problem relates to the home region of the respondents, who were all Tibetans from China; hence perspectives from the international Tibetan community were excluded. Few respondents were from Yunnan and the Tibet Autonomous Region and this geographical skewing may have affected the responses.

A final problem concerns the definition of Tibetologist used here. We define a Tibetologist as anyone who has published an article about Tibet in international, peer-reviewed English language literature. This definition by necessity results in a narrow definition of Tibetology, given that it excludes non-English language publications that account for as much as half of all published literature on Tibet. There is also a gap between this definition, the definition of Tibetology it results in, and the materials analyzed here. Many Tibetologists opt, for a variety of reasons, to find venues for publication other than within the *Proceedings of the International Association of Tibetan Studies*. Excluding their work and focusing only on the *Proceedings* has skewed our results. However, while recognizing that the materials published in the *Proceedings* represents a particular nexus of funding, access to resources, methodological fashions, academic politics, social networks, personal preferences, and other contiguous factors, we maintain that the contents of the *Proceedings* are, to a large extent, representative of mainstream Tibetological discourse and its preoccupations.

Though these flaws limit, they do not invalidate the findings, for Tibetan life as perceived by Tibetans and Tibetological discourse do vary greatly. We now examine the recently arisen critical reflexivity in Tibetology and its inability to close the gap between discourse and lived experience.

PART TWO: CRITICAL DISCOURSE AND ITS FAILURE

In recent years, a discourse has emerged which, for the purpose of this paper, we will call critical Tibetology or critical Tibetological discourse. Inspired by Said's (1978) work on Orientalism, it has critiqued and deconstructed Tibetological discourse, e.g., Adams (1995), Bishop (2001), Brauen (2004), Dodin and Rather (2001), Lopez (1999), Schell (2001), Anand (2008), and Klieger (2002); these are all attempts to deconstruct Western biases, errors, fantasies, and misconceptions about Tibet. In general, they all locate Tibetological discourse as an Orientalist fantasy depicting Tibetan culture as the inverse of Western culture. These works all critique popular discourse on Tibet and not the academic Tibetological discourse, which is the focus of this paper. However, Said (1978) and Foucault (1970) have shown in general, and Stuart (1998) has shown in particular, that academic and popular discourses differ not so much in their content, but in the manner this content is produced. Consequently, we may take these authors' criticisms of popular discourse as applying to Tibetological discourse as defined above.

Given that Tibetology is, in the end, a niche field with a globally small population, it is easy to imagine that the publication of such rigorous, critical works would impact Tibetological discourse. It has, on the rhetorical level at least, garnered some response (e.g., Dreyfus 2005). A final analysis is done to examine the impact of this discourse on productive rather than rhetorical grounds.

Between 27 August and 2 September 2006, the Eleventh Seminar of the International Association of Tibetan Studies was held. We categorized and ranked the papers presented at this conference, employing the same method described above. This conference was held eighteen years after the publication of *Orientalism*, more than a

decade after the first critical Tibetological text was published, and at a time when hundreds of Tibetan areas of China were easily accessible to researchers, both noncitizens and citizens of the PRC. Therefore, a narrowing of the gap between Tibetan life and Tibetological discourse should be evident. Figure Three (below) summarizes our findings.

Figure Three: Analysis of presentation titles from the Eleventh Seminar of the International Association of Tibetan Studies.

Category	Number	Percent ¹⁷
Religion	72	22.5
Literature and Textual Studies	45	14.0
Miscellaneous	35	11.0
Visual Arts (including film)	30	9.0
Health/ Medicine	29	9.0
History	25	8.0
Development/ Modernity	18	6.0
Language	15	5.0
Computing/ IT/ Digitization	8	2.5
Exile	8	2.5
Architecture	7	2.0
Material Culture	6	2.0
Demographics	5	1.5
Music	4	1.0
Environment	4	1.0
Gender	3	1.0
Livelihood	3	1.0
Nationalism	3	1.0
Total	320	

¹⁷ Percentages are rounded, and may not total exactly one hundred percent.

This analysis shows certain changes in Tibetological discourse; the table's top-heaviness has been somewhat reduced. Although religion is the largest category, it constitutes only 22.5 percent of the discourse, or about half of what it previously did.

The question is, then: 'To what extent has the critical Tibetological discourse been successful in reforming Tibetological discourse?' To answer this question, we note that although religion has diminished in proportion, it remains the highest-ranked category. Moreover it is a third larger than the next largest category and if we remove the miscellaneous category from the ranking, then all of the top five categories fall under the rubric of 'high culture'—religion, literature, visual arts, health/ medicine, and history. Together these top five represent 62.5 percent of the total. As noted earlier, this clinging to a mode of inquiry is long out-dated in most other fields of inquiry. If critical Tibetological discourse is having an effect on general Tibetological discourse, it is doing so slowly.¹⁸

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A significant difference between Tibetan life as perceived by Tibetans and Tibetological discourse was initially noted. The former is mostly concerned with subsistence activities while Tibetological discourse is mostly focused on Tibetan 'high culture', particularly text-based manifestations of religion. The failure of critical discourse to bring Tibetology and Tibetan life closer together than before does not suggest that all Tibetologists should abandon their current work and

¹⁸ It is also possible that critical discourse is having no impact. The changes noted above may have been brought about by such other factors as changes in funding regimes or broader theoretical trends in academia.

begin investigating herding and farming. Instead, more attention must be given to studies of such vernacular music as work songs, lullabies, love songs, and non-monastic instrumental music; studies of orations, jokes, 'dirty' stories, urban myths, oral poetics, gossip, and rumors; children's rhymes, games, and tongue twisters; sports, dance, and body techniques; romance, sexuality, gender, weddings, childbirth, childrearing, domestic violence, and divorce; illness, home cures, healers, healing, healthcare choices, death, and funerals; clothing, fashion, hair styles, jewelry, tattooing, and body image; the skills and knowledge associated with such household chores as the collection of fuel and water; animal husbandry, livestock breeding, herding techniques and technologies, grassland management, crop management, and breeding, knowledge and management of soil, and agricultural technologies; flora and fauna, hunting knowledge, veterinary knowledge, way-finding methods, geographical perceptions, and climactic awareness; the annual cycle of work and ritual in rural communities; 'development', the influence and locally negotiated use of new technologies, urbanization, urban migration, and urban adaptation; language—both synchronic and diachronic studies; conflict, violence, and resolution; architectural variation, skills, knowledge, and tools; education, apprenticeships, and cultured learning styles; popular culture, high art (modern and traditional), and reflections on Tibetan modernity; morals, ethics, and aesthetics; and other aspects of life that make up the diverse experience of being Tibetan. Undertaking such studies in specific communities would avoid the prevalent tendency to generalize about pan-Tibetan commonalities.

It must be stressed that we do not recommend that Tibetologists study what Tibetans report they spend their time doing, nor that Tibetologists should study whatever Tibetan people tell them to. Rather, we suggest that

Tibetology should cover a broader, more representative, range of topics than is currently the case.

A shift away from text-based studies of Tibetan religious esoterica to explorations of the diverse ways religion is practiced and understood by Tibetans is necessary, particularly as practiced by the illiterate majority. Women, who are 'most' Tibetans if 'most' is defined as more than fifty percent of the population, are particularly worthy of study: what religious rituals do women perform? Why? Where? When? How?

Apart from their specificity, these recommendations are nothing new. What is new is Tibetologists being incapable of carrying out the reforms necessary to make Tibetology resemble Tibetan reality more and Western fantasy less. Consequently, we recommend greater focus on co-authorship and collaboration between Tibetan and international authors. The negotiation necessitated by this process will lessen the capacity of Tibetologists to enact Orientalist fantasies in print. Secondly, more forums and platforms for Tibetans to represent themselves, with or without the assistance of international collaborators, to audiences, must be made available. Finally, Tibetology, as a discipline, should not be a theoretically isolated and anachronistic field in an age when 'area studies' has been ubiquitously dismembered and abandoned (see Katzenstein 2001 and Chow 1993). Tibetology should be public, negotiated, and peer-critiqued.

REFERENCES

- Adams, V. 1995. *Tigers of the Snow and Other Virtual Sherpas*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Anand, D. 2008. *Geopolitical Exotica: Tibet in Western Imagination*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bangsbo, E. 2009. Schooling for Knowledge and Cultural Survival: Tibetan Community Schools in Nomadic Herding Areas. *Educational Review* 60:1, 69–84.
- Bishop, P. 2001. *Dreams of Power: Tibetan Buddhism and the Western Imagination*. New Delhi: Ardash Books.
- Brauen, M. 2004. *Dreamworld Tibet: Western Illusions*. Trumbull: Weatherhill.
- Childs, G. 2005. Methods, Meanings, and Representations in the Study of Past Tibetan Societies. *Journal of the International Association of Tibetan Studies* 1, 1–11.
- Chow, R. 1993. *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Dodin, T and H Rather. 2001. *Imagining Tibet: Perceptions, Projections, and Fantasies*. Somerville: Wisdom Publications.
- Dreyfus, G. 2005. Are We Prisoners of Shangrila? Orientalism, Nationalism and Tibet. *Journal of the International Association of Tibetan Studies* 1, 1-21.
- Foucault, M. 1970. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Hansen, P. 2003. Why is there no Subaltern Studies for Tibet? *The Tibet Journal* 28:4, 7-22.
- Heider, K. 1975. What do People Do?: Dani Auto-Ethnography. *Journal of Anthropological Research* 31, 3-17.

Asian Highlands Perspectives. 1 (2009), 313-329.

- Katzenstein, P. 2001. Area and Regional Studies in the United States. *PS: Political Science and Politics* 34:4, 789-791.
- Klieger, P. 2002. *Tibet-o-Rama: Self and Other in a Tale from the Edge of Tibet*. San Francisco: Green Arrow Press.
- Lopez, D. 1999. *Prisoners of Shangri La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Said, E. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Schell, O. 2001. *Virtual Tibet: Searching for Shangri-La from the Himalayas to Hollywood*. New York: Owl Books.
- Stuart, K. 1998. *Mongols in Western/ American Consciousness*. Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press.